MUTED HOURS

By Pratick Ghosh

Frank stared at his laptop screen. He had already completed the day's work, but the company mandated that he stay in the office until after 6 PM. He'd opened the code editor window to make it look like he was working, even though he was just staring at nothing in particular.

A tap on the shoulder startled him out of his stupor. "Let's go, man. It's already 6:10 - we're gonna miss the bus," his colleague Sam said.

Frank never really liked Sam. He was too cheerful and outgoing for his taste, and they didn't have much in common. Still, Sam was the only one who talked to him at the office, so he tolerated him.

"Right. Sorry. Let me pack up," Frank said, starting to put his laptop into his backpack. They both headed to the bus stand.

"So, what do you think of the new girl?" Sam asked.
"There's a new hire?" Frank asked, confused. He hadn't heard of anybody joining recently.
"Sometimes I really wonder how someone can be as oblivious as you are, man," Sam said, chuckling.
"Sorry, I haven't been up to date on the recent goings-on of our project," Frank said.
"Were you ever?" Sam replied jokingly.

Frank clenched his teeth. He didn't care a bit about who the new girl was or what she was like, and would rather be having a conversation about anything else, with anybody else, but Sam.
He looked at him and smiled. "I'm just here for the money."
"Of course. Been hearing you say that for the past four years," Sam guffawed.
"That's why you never ask for a promotion." Frank hated his annoying laugh.
"I don't think I'm into licking the manager's boots for a promotion, like someone else I know," Frank said, shooting Sam a smirk.

Sam laughed it off as usual but didn't say anything in reply.

As his bus pulled into the stop, Frank waved goodbye to Sam and stepped on. As soon as he sat down, his drowsiness got the better of him. He slept all the way through the ride.

As he walked up to his house, Frank could already hear his parents bickering loudly from outside. He took a deep breath and opened the door. Both of them stopped abruptly and looked at him.
"How was work, son?" asked his father.

“You know, the usual. I’ll be in my room,” Frank said, moving past them.
“You freshen up, I’ll bring you some tea,” said his mom.

He had already closed the door to his room.

After washing his face in the bathroom, Frank looked at himself in the mirror. His hair and beard had grown out a bit too much. He had told himself countless times that he would go to the barber over the weekend, but when the weekend came, he mostly just slept through both days.

Dark circles had formed under his eyes, probably from all the sleepless nights. It had been almost two years since he injured his back, since he’d gone to the gym, and his muscles seemed to have finally lost all definition. Now he looked like he had a pot belly, even though he’d done nothing but lose weight over the past year or so.

The longer he looked at himself, the more his face contorted in disgust. After a long moment, he finally wiped his face and left the bathroom.

As he sat down at his computer for his daily gaming session, his mother entered the room with his tea and biscuits.

“Is this a good time to talk?” she asked, placing the cup on his table.
“What is it?” Frank asked.
“Your father and I have been thinking of visiting the new family that moved into our neighbourhood and introducing ourselves. I was wondering if you’d come with us. It would be nice for you to see some new faces for a change.”
“I’m not interested,” Frank said, scrolling through his game library.
“Oh, I also heard their daughter works in a similar field as yours. I think you two might get along. Come on, let’s visit them this weekend.”
“I’m not interested, Mom.”
“But—”
“Just leave me alone, please,” Frank said, exasperated, raising his voice.

His mom stopped and stared at him in silence.

“Are you okay, son? You know you can always talk to me.”
“I’m fine. Just leave me be.”

She took another long look at him, then started walking toward the door.
“Close the door properly,” Frank said.

As she shut the door behind her, Frank couldn’t help but feel a pang of guilt, though he wasn’t really sure why.

It took him nearly half an hour to decide what to play. He hadn’t finished a game in almost a year, despite playing every day. It was the same with the books stacked around his room - most of them half-read, forgotten. He didn’t think

much of it anymore. That's just how things were. He'd start something, feel interested for a while, and then one day he'd lose the urge to continue.

He kept playing until his parents had finished dinner and gone to sleep. While he sat down to eat, he put on his earphones and played a random video on YouTube. It was from an obscure channel - someone talking about a string of strange murders in 1970s England. It wasn't a topic he cared about, but as long as something was playing in his ears, it didn't really matter.

After finishing dinner and taking his painkillers, he lay in bed and started scrolling through social media. Hours passed in a blur as he kept watching one meaningless reel after the other. He stopped when he saw some familiar faces. A bunch of classmates from his college had reunited to go on a trip and had posted their photos. Two of them were even getting married soon. They looked really happy together. A small smile cracked on Frank's face, his eyes lingering on the screen. Then, without warning, he choked up. Tears slid down his cheeks. He stared at those photos with an aching sort of longing. He wanted to feel the way they felt, smile and laugh the way they did. The tears stopped as quickly as they came. There was no point in crying, he thought. Frank wiped his eyes and composed himself. It was already 3 AM, and he had work tomorrow. He set his phone aside and closed his eyes, trying to sleep. The hardest part about dying slowly, Frank thought as he drifted off, was pretending you weren't.